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THE DOUBTING THOMAS

OR SAN MICHELE. FLORENCE

ANDREA DEL VERROCCHIO

THE DOUBTING THOMAS

THE BRONZE GROUP BY ANDREA DEL VERROCCHIO*

BY JOHN PICKARD

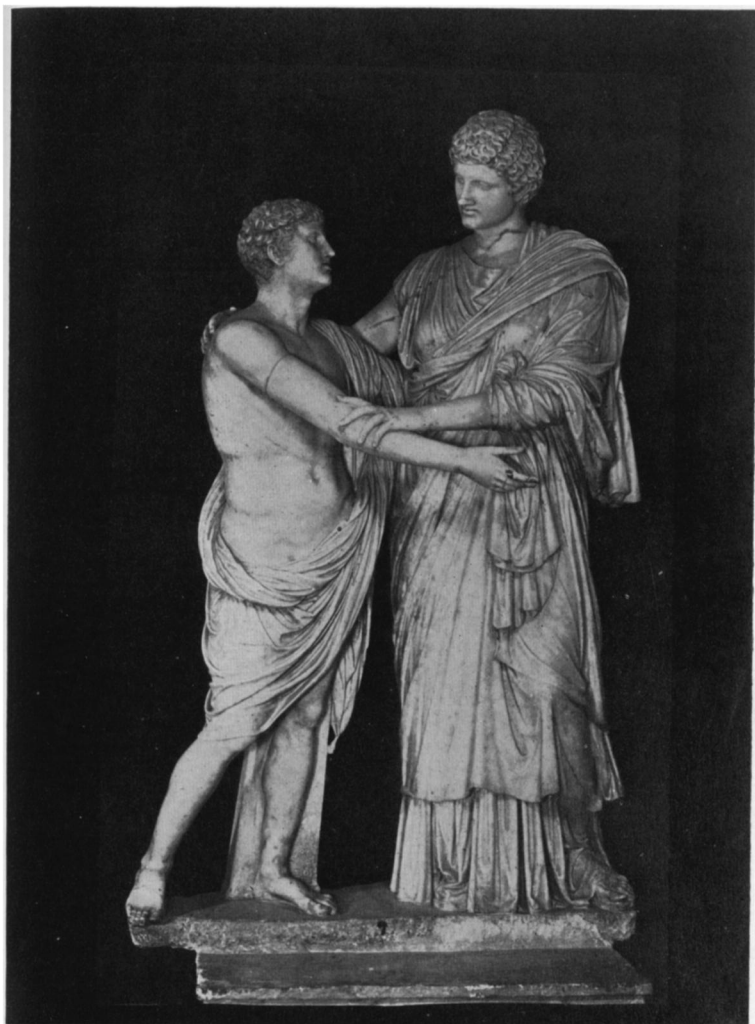
President of the College Art Association of America

IN THE Museo delle Terme in Rome stands the well-known group by the sculptor Menelaus pupil of Stephanus, who was in turn a pupil of Praxiteles. These artists who lived in the first century before Christ assign a fairly definite date to the origin of these figures. They came

to the Terme Museum with the rest of the Ludovisi collection. The earliest known record of the group implies that it was in the possession of the Ludovisi family as early at least as 1623.

Many names have been given to these figures. For Winckelmann they repre-

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GROUP BY MENELAUS IN THE MUSEO DELLE TERME, ROME

sented Orestes and Electra meeting at the grave of Agamemnon. These are probably still the most popular names. Jahn considered that the myth of Merope and Cresphontes was here portrayed. To us of today, however, it seems hardly possible that an artist who has, with so much skill, represented the composition, the drapery

and the sentiment of his figures, would have failed to indicate clearly a myth that he desired to represent. We are, therefore, more inclined to accept the suggestion of Wolters that the group was intended to adorn a grave. In fact the more we study this work of Menelaus the more we are inclined to find here a translation, without

too great a deterioration in quality, of a fourth century attic funereal relief into a first century Roman grave monument. Then observing how rigorously the figures and all the parts of them are kept in one plane we feel that the background of the old Greek gravestone has simply been cut away. For these figures in the round are still in a considerable measure in relief style.

It has been suggested that replicas of the female figure exist and that the youth is of a type often found in Roman Art, that the art of Menelaus in fact, consisted merely in bringing together unrelated types and adapting them to his purpose. If this be true, he has shown remarkable skill in his adaptation. There is a fine contrast between the semi-nude figure on the left and the richly, almost voluminously, draped figure on the right. The long sweeping lines of drapery, so dear to the classic sculptor, lead from the right knee to the left arm of the youth, and from the left shoulder and from the right shoulder of the woman to practically the same point. Just below this point of union the left hand of the woman rests on the right arm of the youth. Just above where these lines of drapery meet the right arm of the woman is visible as it passes behind the shoulder of her companion. This point, just between the two figures, to which the lines converge is the focal point of the group. These converging lines with the earnest gaze of the two pairs of eyes demonstrate to us that we are here dealing with a single unit, a true group, and not with two unrelated units placed near each other.

The woman's, let us say the mother's, figure with broad base, with its ample drapery, seen nearly in full front, gives the impression of dignity, of stability, of strength, of gracious motherly tenderness. The son, seen in three-quarters profile, on slender support looks up to the mother in appealing, yearning dependence. The right foot of the son is drawn back. The inexorable hour has come. He must needs go, perchance on that last redoubtable journey. The mother's left foot is turned aside, not quite so far aside as is her son's. She too will turn that she may not see him depart. But even as they turn, unconscious of all the world besides, they cling

in one last embrace and with eyes of filial, of maternal love, gaze for a moment deep into each other's souls. This singleness of thought, this purity and sincerity of emotion, expressed with classic dignity and classic restraint, it is that renders this product of a decadent period of art attractive to the multitudes who see this group today.

For the central tabernacle on the east façade of Or San Michele in Florence the Guelphs, to whom this niche had been allotted, ordered from no less a sculptor than Donatello a statue of their patron, St. Louis of Toulouse. This statue was apparently completed and placed in position in 1423. But in 1459 the Guelphs had so lost in prestige and power that they were compelled to turn over this tabernacle on Or San Michele to the Florentine Board of Trade. The St. Louis was removed from the niche probably to Santa Croce, where this statue is now to be seen.

In 1465 Verrocchio was employed to fill the vacant niche; and in 1483 this group of the Doubting Thomas was placed in position there.

The representation of the meeting of two persons, ever a troublesome problem for the artist, was here made more difficult because the niche was constructed to contain but one figure. With such happy and complete mastery has Verrocchio solved this difficulty that the niche seems made for the figures rather than the figures for the niche.

The entire composition has as a centre the wound made by the spear of Longinus. To this the left hand of the Christ guides us. To this his right arm leads us back, to this the right hand of the doubter approaches. Upon this the disciple's eyes are fixed. There is hardly a major line of the drapery of the two figures that does not carry us directly or indirectly to this one point.

Christ standing fully within the tabernacle is raised as it were on a pedestal above Thomas. With but a slight turn to the right the Master's figure, seen nearly full face, towers in mass and in meaning over the Thomas who stands a step lower, in profile, before him. The Christ stands with the weight largely upon the left foot. The right leg is bent at the knee. The right foot somewhat removed from the left

forms with it a broad base, thus giving the figure an appearance of stability and repose. The perpendicular strength of the left side of the Christ, seen even through the folds of the mantle is reinforced and emphasized by the column at the right of the niche and the pilaster at the right of the tabernacle. The deep folds of his mantle with their strong shadows, angular and harsh as they are, add to the impressiveness and importance of the figure. The noble head of the Man of Sorrows is bent so that the eyes may rest upon the face of the doubting one. The lips have just pronounced the words: "Reach hither thy hand and thrust it into my side and be not faithless but believing." The right arm is raised that the disciple may draw near. That wonderful right hand sinks almost into the attitude of blessing above the head of him whose faith, once weak, is now again to become strong. This hand forms the apex of the group, the culmination of the long line down the right side of the apostle. It comes forward above the head of Thomas so as to bind together the planes in which the two figures are standing.

The Thomas, slender and graceful of bearing, refined and aristocratic in face and form, resembles not so much a Galilean peasant as that young man who came to Jesus by night, that rich young man whom Jesus loved. Even the decorated covering for his feet contrasts with the plainer sandals of the Christ. Thomas stands outside the niche in the full light. The folds of his robe are less sharply broken than those on the mantle of Christ. The shadows here are far less deep and strong. Even the texture of the cloth seems more pliant and yielding. In soft luxuriance the hair falls about his neck like a veil. The right foot far back so that the right leg cuts diagonally across the fluted column at the left seems to emphasize the doubt with which the lagging feet unwillingly draw near. The entire figure of the Thomas breathes hesitation. Yet the head bows meekly. The eyelids fall in pure humility. The right hand moves wavering forward to the wound in his Lord's side. And we know that the gentle doubter is being rewon to his Master.

Surely up to the moment when Verrocchio's work was completed Italian sculpture

had never created a Christ of a dignity so unapproachable or a disciple of so winsome a mien.

The doubting Thomas is not a theme often treated in Art. Only once before Verrocchio do we find it represented in Italian sculpture. Is, then, this group on Or San Michele entirely the invention, the creation of Verrocchio?

When we place the group of Menelaus side by side with that of the doubting Thomas certain resemblances are immediately apparent. In each group the right hand figure towers above its companion by nearly a head. To each of these figures abundant drapery gives importance. In each a broad base suggests stability and repose. In each there is an adequate expression of great dignity, of noble character, of the protecting kindliness of a superior being. To be sure the mantle of the Christ breaks into folds that are angular and heavy, while the folds of the mother's garment are shallow and smooth, long and sweeping, but that is hardly more than to say that the folds of the one figure are of the Renaissance and the folds of the other are classic. Again the left foot of the mother is drawn back and turned outward while the left foot of the Christ is firmly planted. But that is only to say that the one group represents a scene of parting, and that the other represents a scene of meeting.

But it is in the son and in the Thomas that the most striking analogies are found. The son and the mother stand side by side in the same plane. Thomas stands in front of the Master in a different plane. So the left foot of the Thomas is turned more than the left foot of the Son in order that the doubter may more easily approach the side of his Lord. The right foot of the son and the right foot of the Thomas are in almost identically the same position. So in the two figures the long line of the right side, the profile of the body, the position of the right shoulder and the right arm are practically identical. The son, a true Pagan, is scantily clothed, the Thomas a disciple of Christ, is fully draped. Still the main lines of the mantles of the two figures are surprisingly similar, when we consider that the one figure is Roman and the other Italian.

In each case the figure at the right is serene and masterful, the one at the left is yielding and dependent.

Vasari assures us that Verrocchio was devoted to classic art and that he visited Rome. In Rome then may we not assume that he saw this group of Menelaus? If this be true the work of Menelaus was not first known to the Renaissance world in 1623, the date of the earliest written record concerning this group, but it was seen by the Florentine sculptor 125 years earlier in the middle of the fifteenth century.

But that which the Florentine borrowed from the classic group he marvellously refashioned and remodeled to make it superbly expressive of the conception of his own genius. To say that this group of the Doubting Thomas is immeasurably superior to the work of Menelaus is only to say that this Andrea, the sculptor of the fountain in the Palazzo Vecchio, the sculptor of the David, the sculptor of the Doubting Thomas, the sculptor of the Colleoni in Venice—is only to say that this Andrea del Verrocchio was a great sculptor.

AMERICAN SCULPTURE AT BUFFALO

BY BRUCE M. DONALDSON

FOR years the American Sculptors have labored under great disadvantages in bringing their works to the attention of the public. Their brother artists, the painters, are well cared for by exhibitions in the various art museums and private galleries throughout the country. Their works pass in review constantly and it is an easy matter to keep informed of the latest in painting. The sculptors are not so fortunate. There is little doubt but that sculpture as displayed at our current exhibitions fails to attract the general public. In place of being a focus of interest it is usually surveyed with ill-disguised indifference or ignored save by a slender fraction of the chosen few. Unless something of sensational character be on view the plastic arts do not compete upon even terms with painting and are hence relegated to draughty anterooms and obscure corners. Through continually seeing sculpture treated in an inauspicious fashion we have come to regard the statue, the relief, or the bust, as different phases of the same inevitable evil. They are forms of art which, in the popular mind at least, do not convincingly justify their existence. "One man" exhibitions of sculpture have made the circuit of the museums of the country and have been shown in various private galleries. In that rather unsatisfactory way the public has to a certain extent been informed of the work of our masters. No museum of fine arts in the country has ever given

over its entire building and surrounding grounds to the presentation of sculpture as has been done in the exhibition of contemporary American sculpture being held under the auspices of the National Sculpture Society in the Albright Art Gallery, Buffalo, N. Y.

The idea of the exhibition originated with the late Karl Bitter, a sculptor of international reputation, and President of the National Sculpture Society at the time of his death in 1915. It was for many years Mr. Bitter's desire to hold such an exhibition in the most suitable place under the most favorable conditions. Plans which had been started were temporarily delayed with his death and nothing further was accomplished until after the election of the new president of the National Sculpture Society, Mr. Herbert Adams. It was then that the project was taken up by the President of the National Sculpture Society, the committees originally appointed for the exhibition and Miss Cornelia B. Sage, Director of the Buffalo Fine Arts Academy. A selection of 400 objects from the Panama-Pacific International Exposition, San Francisco, was made, and these exhibits served as a nucleus to which an equal number of works solicited especially for the occasion was added.

The exhibition is in no sense a retrospective one. The purpose is to give the public of America an opportunity of seeing a collection of contemporary American